

# The Beginning of It All

By DEEPANJALI KAKATI

Second looks often lead to fresh interpretations. More so when it is art depicting a cosmopolitan landscape. Sundeep Bali, who spent six months in the United States on a Fulbright fellowship from July to December 2005, found himself reading new meaning in the random shots he brought back to India.

As an artist creating with photography and video, what actually took Bali to the United States was his curatorial expertise and work with museums and exhibitions. He researched communication and interpretation methods and resources used for fine arts and culture at the National Gallery of Art and the Freer and Sackler Galleries in Washington, D.C.

His trip to the United States also gave him a chance to play itinerant documenter of unusual moments within regular scenes. Bali shot nearly 400 photographs and six hours of video footage. From these he exhibited 19 photos and two video installations in his exhibition “Made in USA: An American Experience” at the India Habitat Centre, New Delhi, in May.

“I was just documenting things that were shocking me, amazing me, to show back home. But when I came back I started looking at these things in a different light. I thought they have a particular viewpoint: that of a person who goes to the United States with a lot of stereotypes. Most of these were broken in my initial days in the country,” he says.

A change probably aided by the fact that Bali’s landlady, Martha Smith, who works with the Freer and Sackler Galleries, ended up allowing him to stay at her house for free on condition that he use his Fulbright stipend to travel around the country.

July 4, America’s Independence Day, was Bali’s first day in the United States and quite aptly the opening photograph of his exhibition is called “The Beginning of it All...July 4.” The image of an old couple at the Fourth of July parade in The Palisades, a neighborhood in Washington, D.C., holds a lot of meaning for him. “A lot of people say it’s an old couple and you have called it ‘beginning of it all.’ But this was one of the first photographs I shot in the United States. It was the beginning of my American experience. Fourth of July also marks the beginning of the United States,” says Bali. The variety of cultures on display and the families lining up to watch it reminded Bali of the Republic Day parade in India and is the subject of a number of his photographs.

While Bali did all the “touristy” stuff like traveling to Niagara Falls, what really made an impression on him was the energy of New York. The city’s landmark Empire State Building was a major point of interest for Bali, who says it is ironic how it has once again become the tallest building in New York after 9/11. “It was an icon before the World Trade Center came up and now



*The Empire State*



*Hooray, July 4*

it has again become an icon,” he says.

Bali’s images are also an attempt to capture the cosmopolitan nature of America, which is the inspiration for the exhibition’s title. “A lot of the things available in the United States are actually made elsewhere,” he says. This idea of different parts of the world converging in America appealed to Bali, who feels he has gained a whole new perspective after his U.S. trip: “We should travel with an open mind. People everywhere are the same.” □



# Standing Tall at 75

Throughout the world, this iconic skyscraper symbolizes New York.

By MICHAEL JAY FRIEDMAN

For more than a century, steel-framed towers piercing ever higher into the sky have captured the modern imagination. “One of the most stupendous, one of the most magnificent opportunities...ever offered to the spirit of man,” wrote architect and “father of the skyscraper” Louis Sullivan of the lofty structures. “The force and power of altitude must be in it, the glory and pride of exaltation must be in it.”

Possibly no skyscraper better represents that spirit than the Empire State Building in New York City, which celebrated its 75th anniversary in May. Although it no longer is the world’s—or even the United States’—tallest, the Empire State Building remains iconic. An outstanding example of art deco design, the site of magical cinematic moments and the dominant point of the midtown Manhattan skyline, the Empire State Building remains a treasured landmark, identified by the American Society of Civil Engineers as “one of the seven greatest engineering achievements of American history” and “one of the top engineering monuments of the millennium.”

A number of technological advances combined to make possible the modern skyscraper.

*The colors chosen for the Empire State Building’s nighttime illumination are symbolic. This red, white and blue on August 31, 1990, was a tribute to U.S. military troops.*



JOHN CARUCCI © AP/WWP





*Sarah Hedden, 22, and Chris Lasher, 24, of North Tonawanda, New York, hug on the observation deck of the Empire State Building on Valentine's Day in 2004 after being married on the 80th floor. Many couples get married here on Valentine's Day in mass ceremonies.*

Building materials like steel, glass and reinforced concrete were essential. So was the water pump, which enabled the transport of water to high altitudes. The safety elevator, invented in 1853 by an American, Elisha Otis, and the electric elevator, invented in 1880 by Werner von Siemens of Germany, made it practical for people to live and work in high-rise buildings.

The Empire State Building was constructed at a time when American architecture was influenced by the art deco movement, an artistic style that spanned structural design and the decorative arts. It emphasized clean lines and a streamlined symmetry characteristic of modern mass production. One of the best-known examples of the style is the 282-meter tall

Chrysler Building, completed in 1930. At that time it was the world's tallest, but only 60 centimeters added in a last-minute adjustment allowed it to surpass the 40 Wall Street tower in lower Manhattan, the island on which most of New York City's skyscrapers stand.

The Empire State's builder, John J. Raskob, a former General Motors Corporation executive, was determined to break the Chrysler record. He hired architects Richmond H. Shreve and William F. Lamb to design a building reaching more than 300 meters. To make it even more difficult to surpass their engineering feat, the draftsmen added a 60-meter mast, supposedly intended as a mooring post for zeppelins and other dirigibles. It was, *The Wall Street Journal* later concluded, "the looniest scheme since the Tower of Babel, but it added one of the most dramatic crowns that ever a building wore."

Excavation of the site at 350 Fifth Avenue, between 34th and 35th streets (the former home of the original Waldorf Hotel), began in January 1930, with construction commencing in March. The

building was completed in just 410 days. The construction employed about 3,400 workers, many of them immigrants or members of the Mohawk nation of American Indians.

When President Herbert Hoover switched on the building's lights, the Empire State Building stood 102 stories (and 381 meters) tall—a television transmitter added in 1952 would expand its height to 448 meters. It weighed an estimated 330,000 tons and offered more than 185,700 square meters of floor space.

The Empire State's characteristic shape inspired several other buildings, like the Reynolds Building in Winston-Salem, North Carolina (also designed by Shreve and Lamb), and the Torre Latinoamericana in Mexico City.

Because of its great height and beauty, millions saw the Empire State Building as a symbol of New York City, the nation's greatest metropolis. Hollywood filmmakers utilized this symbolism in a number of feature films. Most famous was *King Kong* (originally released in 1933, and remade in 1976 and 2005), in which the





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Above: A steel worker rests on a girder on the 86th floor of the Empire State Building during construction in 1930.

Left: A view of the building after the steel work was completed.

great ape climbs to the building's apex with a woman in his hand as he battles squadrons of fighter planes.

Both in real life and in movies, like *An Affair to Remember* (1957) and *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993), the Empire State Building is considered a place for romance. Its 86th floor open-air viewing area offers an unparalleled panoramic view of the city for the brides and grooms who marry there on Valentine's Day in mass ceremonies, or for the 3.8 million visitors who in 2005 enjoyed what a character in *An Affair to Remember* called "the closest thing to heaven in New York."

The Empire State Building is home to many other attractions and events. Each year, a group of determined and fit men and women race up its 86 flights of stairs. The National Cartoon Museum, which will house some 200,000 cartoons from

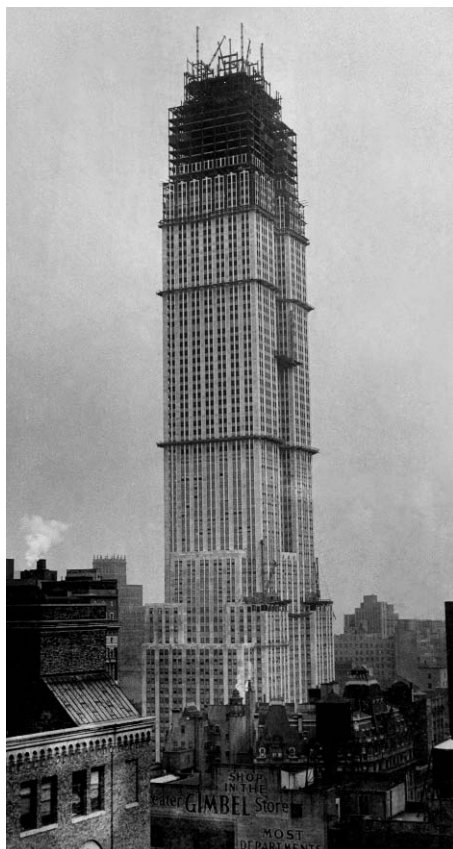
more than 50 countries, is to open there in the fall of 2006.

The Empire State's nighttime illumination has its own symbolism. On some evenings, the chosen colors represent one or another of New York's professional sports teams. At other times, the building is lit in blue and white for the United Nations, in green for Saint Patrick's Day, or in seasonal colors for other holidays.

One night in late 2004, the building remained dark for 15 minutes in tribute to the recently deceased Fay Wray, the star of the original *King Kong*. Remembered forever as the woman held atop the Empire State by a giant ape, Wray enjoyed the association with the famous building and often extolled its splendor.

"Each time I arrive in New York and see the skyline and the exquisite beauty of the Empire State Building," she wrote in her autobiography, "my heart beats a little faster." □

*Michael Jay Friedman* writes for *Washington File*, a product of the Bureau of International Information Programs, U.S. Department of State (<http://usinfo.state.gov>).



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